

Madagascar Swamp Warbler *Acrocephalus newtoni* far from a swamp

Friederike Woog

Rousserolle de Newton *Acrocephalus newtoni* loin d'un marais. Deux Rousserolles de Newton *Acrocephalus newtoni* ont été capturées sur le sommet d'une colline à végétation sèche et dégradée à Maromizaha, à l'est de Madagascar. L'espèce, qui est largement répandue sur l'île, fréquente normalement des peuplements de *Cyperus* ou *Phragmites* et des arbres ou buissons près de marais et mangroves. Les mensurations des deux oiseaux et une courte description de la végétation du site sont présentées. Des données supplémentaires sur la présence de l'espèce loin de marais contribueraient à élucider ses exigences écologiques.

The Madagascar Swamp Warbler *Acrocephalus newtoni* is widespread on Madagascar and usually found in *Cyperus* or *Phragmites* stands, or in trees or scrub near marshes or mangroves (Morris & Hawkins 1998, Sinclair & Langrand 1998). It has relatively large feet which permit the birds to grasp larger reeds or branches. In other *Acrocephalus* there is a strong correlation between morphology and environment (Leisler *et al.* 1989). However, a population of *A. newtoni* is known from low ericoid thicket (a vegetation structure dominated by Asteraceae and Ericaceae: Gautier & Goodman 2003) above the treeline, in the Andringitra Massif, at 2,050 m. The birds at this location are genetically and morphologically very similar to marsh-dwelling birds (Goodman *et al.* 2000). Nonetheless, occurrence away from swamps is apparently uncommon and thus noteworthy.

On 13 December 2005, I caught two Madagascar Swamp Warblers at the north-west edge of Maromizaha, a private rainforest reserve near Andasibe, Perinet, eastern Madagascar (Fig. 1). The site is usually dry and is within an open, degraded hilltop near a quarry (18°57'S 48°27'E; 1,100 m). Large trees are nowadays

absent and introduced grasses, herbs and shrubs, e.g. *Lantana camara*, *Solanum mauritianum*, *Clidemia hirta* and *Psidia altissima*, prevail. Vegetational structure is relatively open with bare soil in places. The site is surrounded by patches of *Eucalyptus* of varying age, except for a moderately logged but otherwise intact primary forest that lies c.500 m distant, to the south-east. The birds could only have reached the site through or over the forest (unlikely), along the dirt road or via the *Eucalyptus* forest.

In December 2005 the site was slightly flooded following heavy rainfall (temporary puddles with c.10 cm of standing water), inducing some frogs to call. In September–November of 2003, 2004 and 2006 we never observed flooding at the site, nor frogs nor *A. newtoni*. It is very unlikely that we overlooked the species as our surveys were detailed.

Morphometrics (Table 1), photographs and a blood sample were taken. Mensural data for the bill (from base of skull to bill tip and from distal end of nostril) and wing (max. chord), were commensurate with those published by Goodman *et al.* (2000), except for tarsus which was measured differently (here: metatarsal bone or 'minimum' tar-

Table 1. Morphometrics of two Madagascar Swamp Warblers *Acrocephalus newtoni* caught at Maromizaha, eastern Madagascar, in December 2005.

Tableau 1. Mensurations de deux Rousserolles de Newton *Acrocephalus newtoni* capturées à Maromizaha, Madagascar de l'est, en décembre 2005.

Ring number (SAFRING)	Wing	3rd primary	Tarsus	Weight	Bill Length*	Bill height*	Bill width*	Bill-skull
FA68162	66	49	25	15.9	10.2	3.2	3.6	18.8
FA68163	70	52.5	25.3	17.9	9.3	3.2	3.0	18.1

* = taken from distal edge of nostril.



Figure 1. Madagascar Swamp Warbler *Acrocephalus newtoni* caught at Maromizaha, eastern Madagascar, 13 December 2005 (Friederike Woog)

Rousserolle de Newton *Acrocephalus newtoni* capturée à Maromizaha, est de Madagascar, 13 décembre 2005 (Friederike Woog)



Figure 2. Unusual habitat for a Madagascar Swamp Warbler *Acrocephalus newtoni*: an open, degraded hilltop near a quarry at Maromizaha, eastern Madagascar, December 2005 (Friederike Woog)

Un milieu inhabituel pour la Rousserolle de Newton *Acrocephalus newtoni* : un sommet de colline à végétation ouverte et dégradée près d'une carrière à Maromizaha, est de Madagascar, décembre 2005 (Friederike Woog)

sus, following Redfern & Clarke 2001). With their streaked breast and chestnut iris with a 'piercing' look, the captured birds were apparently adult. The inside of the throat was bright orange, and their body-, wing- and tail-feathers very worn. They lacked body fat reserves, indicating they were not undertaking any long-distance migration.

Although considered sedentary ('flies only short distances': Langrand 1990), *A. newtoni* appears either (1) to depart swamps temporarily, perhaps only in the wet season when usually dry

sites are flooded, or (2) to possess a wider habitat range than previously described. Palearctic *Acrocephalus* species are well known to winter in dry habitats in Africa and the resident *A. baeticatus* also may spend the off-season in drier places (Urban *et al.* 1997). The Seychelles Warbler *A. sechellensis* occurs in scrub and tall, scrub-like vegetation, Cape Verde Warbler *A. brevipennis* is now found in a broad range of habitats, including gardens and agricultural areas, and Rodrigues Warbler *A. rodericanus* has adapted to dense thickets in largely exotic vegetation (BirdLife International 2000). Further data on the occurrence of the Madagascar Swamp Warbler away from swamps, especially in the wet season, would assist to clarify its ecological requirements.

Acknowledgements

I thank the Malagasy Government for granting all necessary permits and the Foundation for Tropical Nature and Species Conservation (NAT) for inviting me to work at Maromizaha. I am indebted to my Malagasy colleagues from the Université d'Antananarivo, Olga Ravoahangimalala, Daniel Rakotondravony, Haganirina Rakotomana and Narisoa Ramanitra. Kathrin Marquart (Staatliches Museum für Naturkunde Stuttgart), Rasolondraibe Lovahsina Tahiry (Université d'Antananarivo) and the local guides were of invaluable assistance in the field. Roger Safford, Guy Kirwan and Ron Demey kindly helped to improve the manuscript.

References

- BirdLife International. 2000. *Threatened Birds of the World*. Barcelona: Lynx Edicions & Cambridge, UK: BirdLife International.
- Gautier, L. & Goodman, S. M. 2003. Plants. In Goodman, S. M. & Benstead, J. P. (eds.) *The Natural History of Madagascar*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Goodman, S. M., Tello, G. T. & Langrand, O. 2000. Patterns of morphological and molecular variation in *Acrocephalus newtoni* on Madagascar. *Ostrich* 71: 367–370.
- Leisler, B., Heidrich, R., Schulze-Hagen, K. & Wink, M. 1997. Taxonomy and phylogeny of reed warblers (genus *Acrocephalus*). *J. Orn.* 138: 469–496.
- Langrand, O. 1990. *Guide to the Birds of Madagascar*. New Haven, CT & London, UK: Yale University Press.
- Morris, P. & Hawkins F. 1998. *Birds of Madagascar: A Photographic Guide*. Robertsbridge: Pica Press.

Redfern, C. P. F. & Clarke, J. 2001. *The Ringers Manual*. Thetford: British Trust for Ornithology.
Sinclair, I. & Langrand, O. 1998. *Birds of the Indian Ocean Islands*. Cape Town: Struik.
Urban, E. K., Fry, C. H. & Keith, S. (eds.) 1997. *The Birds of Africa*. Vol. 5. London, UK: Academic Press.

Staatliches Museum für Naturkunde Stuttgart, Germany.
E-mail: woog.smns@naturkundemuseum-bw.de

Received 23 February 2007; revision accepted 15 October 2007.



TROPICAL BIRDING
Turning Birdwatchers into Birders & Birders into Conservationists

Africa
Gabon. Cameroon. Ghana. Kenya. Ethiopia. Uganda. Rwanda. Malawi. Tanzania. Madagascar & Comoros. Namibia. Zambia. South Africa.

Asia
Bhutan. Thailand. Malaysia. Cambodia. Borneo. Taiwan. Papua New Guinea. Phillipines. Australia. New Zealand

South America
Ecuador & Galapagos. Brasil. Peru. Costa Rica. Venezuela. Guyana. Mexico. Argentina

ABC For full details of all our tours visit us at www.tropicalbirding.com or email us at info@tropicalbirding.com for a free catalogue.